

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

181456Z Feb 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000236

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP
CAIRO FOR STEVE BONDY
LONDON FOR ETHAN GOLDRICH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2034

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: BOYCOTTERS RIG LABOR UNION FEDERATION BOARD
ELECTIONS.

Classified By: By Charge D'Affaires Robert S. Ford for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Bahrain's two leading opposition societies colluded to fix the labor union federation board elections with the plan to use the labor movement as a political platform. By ignoring standard democratic election and bylaw procedures, opposition parties realized their plans but also thwarted the board's ability to legislate, make decisions, and set a labor agenda. Disillusioned by the opposition parties' machinations, several large unions are attempting to extricate themselves from this quagmire and are discussing the establishment of a second, non-politicized federation. National Democratic Action Society and Al Wifaq's resorting to non-democratic methods to gain control of Bahrain's union federation board raises serious questions about the societies' long-term commitment to democracy. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Even though the General Federation of Bahraini Workers (GFBW) notified several government agencies about holding its first ever federation conference, no government official offered to speak at the conference opening or sponsor a venue. (NOTE: It is normal in Bahrain for ministers to 'patronize' public events related to their ministries. END NOTE) The GFBW went ahead anyway and one hundred and forty-nine union delegates attended the conference, representing 39 labor unions from both the public and private sectors. The purpose of the three-day conference was to ratify the federation's statute and bylaws. GFBW invited the Arab Workers Union to guide election proceedings and to establish federation bylaws and operational procedures.

COOKING THE ELECTIONS

13. (U) GFBW Labor Consultant Dr. Mohammed Merbati told PolOFF that inviting the Arab Workers Union brought unexpected results. He believes that the Arab Workers Union came to the conference to ensure that a non-democratic 'Arab' federation be established, in line with the federations of Iran, Iraq and Kuwait. Standard democratic election procedures allow for each union member to vote for its own board and also to elect conference delegates to represent them at the foundational conference. (the number of each union's conference delegates is proportional to the size its union.) To ensure a predominance of opposition party delegates, Al Wifaq and National Democratic Action Society (NDAS) requested that the Arab Workers Union forego the selection process of voting for conference delegates. The Union complied and invited delegates directly from union boards, the majority of whom has affiliation with the two opposition societies.

14. (C) Bringing the delegate selection process to light, "Al Ayam" published an article on January 11 also claiming that opposition societies clandestinely agreed to divide the GFBW board membership among themselves; 5 from NDAS and 6 from Al Wifaq. Journalists accused both opposition societies of hijacking the elections and politicizing the trade union movement. However, on January 18, media reports subsided when the GFBW Central Council elected independent candidate Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Hussain its General Secretary. Dr. Merbati explained to PolFSN that neither opposition society had issue with Hussain as General Secretary based on his experience and stature. However, Al Wifaq member Adel Al Abassi told PolOFF he was angered to find out about Hussain's appointment. Hussain used to be a Shura Council member of the old regime. In the 1990's Hussain was named General Secretary of the GOB's National Labor Committee, precursor to the GFBW. In that position, Hussain publicly accused Shi'a opposition leaders (many of whom are now leaders in Al Wifaq) of being a "bunch of terrorists." Al Abassi surmised that Hussain tricked both Al Wifaq and NDAS labor leaders by telling both he was aligning with them. The other two independent candidates aligned themselves with NDAS to secure seats on the board. In the end press reports were correct: the election results established a central council with 5 NDAS, 6

Al Wifaq, 1 independent, and 1 from National Democratic Congregation.

FEELING USED AND ABUSED

15. (C) A review of board committee positions reveal that NDAS holds the more prestigious positions on the board. Al Abassi told PolOFF that unlike NDAS, Al Wifaq is not an expert in labor. Al Wifaq colluded with NDAS not realizing that committee designations made a difference in the balance of power. An unauthorized Deputy Secretary General position was created at the outcome of the elections and given to Al Wifaq. Although Deputy Secretary General would appear to be the second-ranking position on the board, the position does not exist in the bylaws and has no authoritative power. Al Wifaq feels used by NDAS. Both NDAS and al-Wifaq feel used by Abdul Ghaffar Hussain. Now Al Wifaq is making an effort to woo the independent board members away from NDAS to try to rectify the imbalance. Al Abassi added that it does not help that every Al Wifaq member on the board is a 'soft spoken moderate.' He said there is talk among Al Wifaq board members that the decision try and dominate the labor federal board was a political mistake. Some believe Al Wifaq can gain more ground politically by focusing on real solutions to actual labor issues.

16. (U) In a statement to the press, GFBW Assistant Secretary for Activities and Social Protection and member of

SIPDIS

the National Democratic Congregation Khalid Al Aradi resigned his position because of the NDAS and Al Wifaq collusion. His replacement, Al Menbar Islamiyya member Qassab also announced his resignation for the same reasons. NDAS member Almousawi claims Al Aradi quit because he failed to get the prestigious Assistant Secretary position for Arab and International Affairs. Both Almousawi and Al Abassi claim Al Aradi and Qassab took the opportunity to embarrass NDAS and Al Wifaq.

GFBW GOING NOWHERE; SOME UNIONS HEADED ELSEWHERE

17. (C) With all the attention focused on getting opposition leaders in board positions, the conference failed to establish clear operational guidelines for the board. Even though 8 of the 12 federation board members have over 100 years of combined labor movement expertise and knew each other in the labor movement many years prior to joining political societies, the lack of established bylaws and operational procedures has paralyzed the federation. Dr. Merbati claims that instead of creating a legitimate federation with a vision for the labor movement, the opposition societies crippled the federation, tossed out its credibility for the next 4 years, ultimately damaging the labor movement. Shura Council member Faisal Fulad told PolOFF that union representatives from Batelco, Automotive, Petrochem, BenGaz, Ministry of Interior, Gulf Airline Stewards, and Alba contacted Dr. Merbati and himself to find a way to leave GFBW and start a new federation that has no political affiliations whatsoever.

18. (C) COMMENT. Opposition societies went to great lengths to rig the GFBW board elections, ensuring they were neither free nor fair. This has resulted in many unions wanting to leave the GFBW and establish a second federation. It also demonstrates their desire for a legitimate democratic federation. Although Al-Wifaq and NDAS colluded to gain control of the board, the emerging competition between them to wield board power revealed that there is friction among the political parties which boycotted the October 2002 parliamentary election. NDAS/Al-Wifaq have tarnished their image and certainly have raised serious questions about their long-term commitment to fair-play and democracy.

FORD